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The American Institute of Sacred Literature

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE APOSTOLIC AGE

The moral and social conditions in the earliest Christian communities of Palestine and of the Mediterranean world are of great interest. How completely did the first Christians make the ideal of Jesus and of Paul their own? How thoroughly did they accomplish this ideal in their everyday lives? Particularly as regards the gentile Christians, were they able to rise well above the pagan morality to which they had been accustomed and by which they were still surrounded? We could not expect that the first Christians would reach moral and social perfection, but we do find them striving earnestly to attain to the high gospel standard of purity, righteousness, and brotherliness. Their shortcomings appear in the New Testament writings, but much more one may see there the wonderful success of Christianity in elevating the moral and social life of the members of its communities. The present inquiry seeks to bring out the main facts of this kind, in which we can see Christianity inaugurating a moral and social renovation.

This study of the Christian life in the apostolic age is conducted by PROFESSOR GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT. Questions concerning it may be addressed to the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE.

III. CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

The question which we are to consider this month is whether early Christianity displayed a moral power that was commensurate with its ideal. Did it make bad men good and good men better? Interest is centered not on the teaching but rather on the practice of morals. In this study we shall use von Dobschütz's "Christian Life in the Primitive Church" as our special guide.

It is admitted that our sources are very fragmentary, noticeably so in regard to statistics of all sorts, but it is held at the same time that they yield to a competent interpreter a picture of the actual life of the early church which is more satisfactory than would at first appear possible.

The author, without explanation or justification of his course, begins his treatise with the Pauline churches. We are introduced at once to

the life of believers in Corinth, and the preceding twenty years of Christian history are for the time ignored. Not until Book II do we come to consider the beginning of the Christian movement. This inversion of the historical sequence tends to give undue emphasis to the originality and importance of Paul.

The churches of Paul are treated in four groups, viz., Corinth, the churches of Macedonia, the churches of Asia Minor, and the church at Rome. Christian life in Corinth naturally receives much the fullest treatment as our sources of information are here most detailed. It should not be overlooked by the student in forming his conception of life in the apostolic age as a whole that this church of which we have the most complete picture was more crude and defective than, for instance, the church at Philippi.

One may doubt whether it is justifiable to speak of the church in Corinth as "great" in size, and may consider it unwarrantable to speak of it as having "outlying branches in other places of the province of Achaia." Paul indeed addressed our second Corinthian letter to the "church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia." But at a time when the Christians of Corinth had no ecclesiastical organization among themselves we obviously cannot regard the Christians in other parts of the province as "branches" of the Corinthian church. This point, however, is quite incidental.

When we come to things essential, we are told that the disciples were bound together and marked off from the world by two facts, viz., confession of the name of Jesus and possession of the Spirit of God. Possession of the Spirit was manifest particularly in the devotional meetings. Significant for the ethical value of these meetings is the fact that all the members of the church participated in them on a common level. This is quite true, but we may add that the confusion resulting from the unlimited freedom and spontaneity of the meetings also had ethical significance. It both disclosed and fostered a tendency to intellectual pride and disregard for other worshipers.

The author points out that the Christians of Corinth showed a want of "moral grasp" in supposing that the more unnatural and unintelligible the manifestation of the Spirit was, by so much was it more divine and more to be sought. A similar lack of moral insight was shown by their view of baptism, according to which it had an external and miraculous efficacy. The Lord's Supper, on the contrary, was not regarded as a sacrament, says von Dobschütz, but was treated as a common festive meal. This, however, was not Paul's own view of the Supper.

The Christian attitude toward marriage was a subject of intense interest in Corinth, and Paul's handling of the various questions involved was marked by great practical sense. A Christian who is joined to heathen is not to fear pollution. Christianity will sanctify the relation and determine the religious status of the children. But if the heathen partner will not continue in wedded life with a Christian, then the Christian is free. The indissolubleness of the marriage bond is here set aside. The Christian, however, instead of forcing a separation is to win the heathen partner if possible. So much in regard to mixed marriages. Whether Christianity "demands" that a Christian man marry only a Christian is a question that is hardly disposed of by the word of Paul in I Cor. 7:39.

Another living question in Corinth, and elsewhere too, was how the converted slave should regard his lot. It is well said that the moral strength of the new religion revealed itself in the fact that it made faithful, obedient, and conscientious slaves. It is thought that Paul dissuaded from ransom, where ransom was possible, because he did not wish to have the church burdened for the support of emancipated slaves, and also because he regarded the existing social relations as divinely appointed. Slavery lost much of its power, it is thought, by the equality of the slave in the church, and by his unrestricted share in the future salvation. The Christian master was not expected to free his Christian slaves, but he must regard them as brethren in the Lord. Thus, while the outward relationship remained, it was inwardly transformed.

In the discussion of woman's participation in public meetings one point in our author's position may be especially noted, viz., his harmonizing of I Cor. 11:5 with 14:34. It is thought that Paul had at first allowed women to take part in public prayer and prophecy and that later, because of disorders, he forbade it entirely. Is it, however, certain that I Cor. 14:34a is to be taken absolutely, and is it probable that Paul would contradict himself in an important matter of public conduct within the compass of a few chapters?

The case of incest in Corinth is treated very fully and the solution of the problems involved is worthy of careful consideration. We will not enter here into this exposition, but will simply note the bearing of the incident upon the moral state of the Corinthian church. It is not the fact that a case of gross sin had occurred in the church which is especially significant, but the fact that the church *defended* it. Von Dobschütz holds that the opposition of the church to the apostle was not due to its love of immorality but rather to its jealous regard for the

principle of freedom. Had their defense of the offender been due to an inward approval of his deed, then surely Paul would have laid bare this ground and would have broken off his connection with them. It is rather to be held that their attitude toward the apostle was determined by an extreme and unbalanced adherence to a principle which he had preached to them, viz., "All things are lawful." This view is obviously in accord with all that we know of the Corinthians' exaltation of knowledge. It does not free the church from the charge of immaturity in moral judgment or from the charge that it was lacking in regard for the man who had brought to it the knowledge of Christ, but it does free it from the charge that it approved of gross immorality.

That there was a considerable lack of Christian generosity in the Corinthian church is inferred from the apparent difficulty which Paul had in raising a fit contribution for the poor in Jerusalem and also from the utterly selfish manner in which, at the common meal, the poor members of their own fellowship were neglected.

The contrast between "strong" and "weak" is held to have been fundamental not only in Corinth but in all the church of the apostolic age. These two classes may be regarded, in some measure, as representing the two fundamental qualities of liberty and sanctity. The "strong" emphasized liberty without due consideration for other qualities, and the "weak" laid similar emphasis on the importance of sanctity. To the "weak" is conceded greater moral *earnestness*, to the "strong" greater moral *power*. But the earnestness was hampered by timidity, and the power was easily led into self-indulgence.

The immaturity of the Corinthian church is seen again in the party spirit which was early developed. This is ascribed, without proof, to the character of the preaching of Apollos, while at the same time it is thought to have been congenial to the Greek of that day. The rank growth of party spirit in Corinth shows a deep lack of church consciousness or even of Christian consciousness.

In treating the churches of Macedonia the author seeks to show a contrast between Thessalonica and Philippi in regard to maturity of character. The letters to the Thessalonians were written soon after the formation of the church, while that to the Philippians followed a decade of Christian growth among its leaders. Yet the Thessalonian Christians, in contrast to those of Corinth, are said to have had a remarkable church consciousness and to have abounded in brotherly love. The particular evidence of immaturity in Thessalonica was the strained anticipation of the Lord's coming. This is supposed to have been pro-

moted by the poverty of the Thessalonian Christians which bred dissatisfaction with their social condition. The preaching of Paul was, however, the starting-point of the strong current feeling on the subject of the Parousia. One wonders whether Paul emphasized this doctrine more in Thessalonica than he had previously done in Philippi or than he did later in Corinth, and if so, what led him to do it. It may be that the unhealthy development in Thessalonica was due mainly to local conditions.

The relative maturity of the Philippian church is apparent in the lack of exhortation in the letter to them and in the pervading spirit of confidence in their judgment and devotion. It is manifest also in the consciousness of unity that pervaded the church, a fact that may well have been due to the organization which the church had created for its needs.

When we come to the churches of Galatia and the Phrygian church at Colossae, our sources do not reflect the actual state of morality in these communities, at any rate to any considerable degree. A general condition of prosperity is implied. There is no trace of such immorality as was to be found in the Corinthian church, if we except the evil of discord. The trouble in the churches of Galatia was doctrinal, a fall from the freedom of the gospel to the sub-Christian level of Judaism. Doctrinal also was the defect in Colossae, though not wholly the same as in the churches of Galatia. Though blended with Old Testament elements, it bears the stamp of the dualistic nature-worship long at home in these regions.

Our author counts Rome among the Pauline churches, but uses the Epistle to the Romans only as in a limited degree making us acquainted with the moral state of the Roman church. The question which is discussed with most show of acquaintance with specific Roman circumstances is that of the "strong" and the "weak," but this is doctrinal.

We must turn now to Jewish Christendom. Here we have to do with people who had long lived under the civilizing influences of a divine law. Hence Christian morality has here a more precise stamp upon it. The early Christian community—a family rather than a church—consisted of pious Jews whose attitude toward Jesus increased rather than lessened their loyalty to the Jewish law. But when they began to meet by themselves, new customs were developed. Community of goods, however, was not one of these new customs, according to von Dobschütz, though he allows that it is found in Acts. He thinks that Luke was strongly inclined to communism and consequently put

it into his more or less ideal picture of the first days. However, if there was not community of goods in the ordinary sense of that phrase, brotherly love was unlimited, and as each one shared with any in need there was virtual communism.

Yet this earliest Christian community was not ideal, and it is plain that the author of Acts, who gives the incident of Ananias and relates how discord arose over the daily ministration of charity, did not aim to wipe out all shadows. It is possible and quite conceivable that a Christian writer might unconsciously soften the hard lines of the early Christian life which he was describing, but that is a different thing from a clear purpose on his part to produce a picture of purely ideal relationships. We are without proof that Luke entertained such a purpose.

The Judaism of the Jerusalem church is strongly stated by our author, we venture to think too strongly. This appears, for example, in what he says of James and the Apostolic Decree. On the basis of Acts 21:25 the decree is regarded as issued by James long after Paul had left the Syro-Cilician field. The decree is said to reveal the true Jewish contempt for the heathen in that it presupposes among the Jews that morality which it enjoins on the Gentiles. Its Pharisaism is seen in its combination of ceremonial requirements with morality. The author's portrait of James is taken from Hegesippus rather than from Acts and Paul.

In describing the Judaistic propaganda von Dobschütz does not remind the reader with sufficient clearness that this propaganda was carried on only by a section of the Jerusalem church, and that section not the dominant one. It never included the leaders of the church. The recognition of this fact is necessary if justice is to be done to the Jerusalem church as a whole.

We turn again to Asia Minor, to churches which are under the Pauline influence as their state may be inferred from the Epistle to the Ephesians (written by someone who was dominated by Paul's spirit) and from I Peter (written after Peter's death). In two particulars an advance on Paul is found in these writings. First, the Christian morality is more strongly supported from the Old Testament, and second, this moral teaching, as based on Jesus, appeals to his earthly life more than Paul does. With the growth of a more definite ideal of the church in Asia Minor, at the time when these letters were written there were manifest two moral defects, viz., a tendency to shun the burden and danger of office, or, if accepting office, to exploit it for the sake of personal aggrandizement, and a tendency to heretical views. These are only

touched in vague general terms, but are thought to be the same that are met later in the Johannine writings.

For the Christianity of Rome in the later part of the apostolic age our author uses the Epistle to the Hebrews as the chief source of information. This is thought to have been addressed to some one of the "house-churches" in Rome and not to the entire Christian community. The moral condition of the readers was due to the persecution to which they had been subjected. By this they had been led to withdraw into themselves, and had also been led to seek in ceremonialism for a means of atonement. The suffering which they had endured had wrought in them a sense of guilt according to a widespread view of suffering in ancient times.

Whatever one may think of this interpretation of the Epistle, it must of course be admitted that we have no forcible evidence in support of the view that the readers contemplated by the author of Hebrews were Christians of Rome.

For the Christianity of the Asia Minor churches toward the close of the first century the Johannine writings, attributed to the "presbyter" John who dominated these churches, are our source of information. This man exercised his sway through itinerant preachers and through his letters. Opposition to him was not lacking, as the case of Diotrephes shows; and if this opposition was inspired by a desire for self-government, there was something to be said for it. By the side of this opposition to the presbyter's ecclesiastical authority there was false teaching by men who had "gone out" from the school of John. This false teaching consisted in a perversion of the presbyter's words, as, for example, in a literal interpretation of the saying that "whosoever is begotten of God sinneth not."

The value of the seven letters of the Apocalypse for the purpose in hand is fully recognized by the author. They show that there was much to be blamed in the churches addressed, more to be praised. A strong tendency to asceticism is inferred from Rev. 14:3-4.

The Gospel of John, like the Apocalypse, is severe in its judgment on the Jewish people. It even represents Jesus as filled with the same spirit. But the ideal which it sets up for the Christian life is eminently simple and practical. It is to keep the word of Christ, to do God's will, to bear fruit in a love that is ready to make the last sacrifice. Thus the Fourth Gospel is regarded as reflecting the views and condition of the church at the close of the first century.